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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/SPG, S/CRS, AF/PD, IIP/G/AF, RRU-AF, AF SE WILLIAMSON
ADDIS ABABA FOR USAU
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [OIIP](#) [SU](#)
SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: DAWN OF SE WILLIAMSON'S VISIT

REFTEL: 07 KHARTOUM 2065

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: There has been a storm of media interest in the run-up to Special Envoy Williamson's visit to Sudan. Some papers echo the cautiously optimistic attitude of the Sudanese government that a positive outcome may result of the visit, while others cast the trip as "more business as usual" in the bilateral relationship. There is also particular interest in the timing of the Special Envoy's visit coinciding with that of the Chinese Special Envoy on Darfur. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) A press release by the Sudan News Agency (SUNA) on the visit has been widely circulated in the local media since it was released on February 22. According to the release, Foreign Minister Deng Alor briefed President Bashir on his delegation's recent visit to Washington, describing it as "positive" and "a step towards serious dialogue" between Sudan and the United States. Deng said the two sides were on the "right path" to resolve the following issues: bilateral relations, Darfur, the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and the problems faced by the Sudanese Embassy in Washington and the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum. In addition, he said that Sudan's listing on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list was discussed, as was the issue of Sudanese prisoners at Guantanamo.

¶3. (U) Adam Mohamed Adam, a columnist with the liberal Al-Sudani daily, wrote on February 24 that the Special Envoy is "expected to bring answers" to the problem issues between Sudan and the United States. He described the Special Envoy as a seasoned diplomat who has held important positions in the USG. Adam pointed out that the Williamson played key roles as the Illinois Republican Party Chief when the state was "rocked by a scandal during the tenure of Governor George Ryan." Adams says this is good for Sudan as Williamson was "a peacemaker in a divided and harsh climate." The author speculated whether that the Special Envoy "will have all the answers" or if he will instead "resign quickly."

¶4. (U) In the same Al-Sudani column, Adam also wrote that "some analysts believe Williamson may not fare any different from Natsios" because "they both receive their instructions from Washington." Adam quoted Sudanese strategic studies expert Dr. Ibrahim Mirghani, as saying "the Special Envoys fail in their mission not for lack of initiative or ideas but because of Washington's unrelenting policies on Sudan." Mirghani said President Bush ignored Sudan during his recent Africa visit. He said that despite Charge d'Affaires Fernandez's good intentions, relations between Sudan and the United States "have worsened."

¶5. (U) Some newspapers have made an issue of the "the unprecedented coincidence of visits" to Sudan by the U.S. and Chinese Special Envoys. The pro-government, anti-West Al-Intibaha newspaper stated

that "the government will need to choose which Envoy it prefers to interact with more positively." In a first page article, the newspaper claims that "some Sudanese ministers have noted their preference toward China" because "Sudan feels it has more to gain in its relations with China than with the U.S." The paper also states that "the issue of bilateral relations with the U.S." will "certainly have a prominent position" in the government's discussions with Special Envoy Williamson.

¶6. (U) An editorial article in Khartoum's Al-Ayaam newspaper entitled "America and China meet today in Khartoum" was published on February 24. The paper stated that both the U.S. and Chinese Special Envoys are expected to arrive February 24. The editorial stated that "while the two envoys may not hold direct talks" with one another, they "do have a common interest - Darfur." The author posited what the official Sudanese reaction to the visits might be "in light of direct pressures from the U.S." and "indirect pressures from China in the form of 'friendly advice.'"

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: While the media's predictions for the outcome of the Special Envoy's visit are mixed, on the whole they are decidedly more optimistic in their assessments than they were in late December 2007 (see reftel).

FERNANDEZ